

Inter-Religious Diplomacy: Trustworthy Opponents Engaging in Respectful Contestation Yield Peaceful Tension

By Charles Randall Paul

Inevitable Conflict over the Purpose of Life

Historically, when people have found themselves in conflicts over the best way to live or the very purpose of life, they have often found a way to separate from—if not fight—each other to protect their cultural order. Underneath the nation-state and tribal structures, societies have traditionally shared a deep cultural world-view that is religious. As our societies continue to become intertwined through virtual and actual migration today, there exist significant tensions between our cultural and religious beliefs and practices. Global trade, modern technology and the common use of the scientific method will not yield universal agreement over the purpose of life and religion. Indeed, as educational and economic differences between peoples decrease, their differences over foundational beliefs become more salient. No economic system, no universal liberal education program, and no political system, even one that emphasizes individual freedom, can resolve our deeper cultural differences over ultimate truth and religion. What do we do when we have irresolvable conflicts over the very foundation of order and purpose? This paper will explore this question.

With the recent end of the most violent century in human history—if body counts from violence are the measure—the new century has begun with a mixture of disillusionment and hope for improving our lives without war or coercion. Human evils seem to be a continual source of conflict, but we must recognize that disagreement over the right way to implement our higher values—justice, truth, loyalty and peace—is also a serious perennial source of conflict between cultural or ideological opponents of equal intelligence and integrity. In an attempt to avoid conflicts over values, many of us urge the restriction of political discourse to rule-based legal proceduralism. While the rule of law is extremely useful in many mundane situations, it alone cannot sustain the pressure from religious or cultural conflicts over fundamental social values and mores upon which laws rest (de Tocqueville 1988, 274, 287). The robust desire to publicly promote the highest good and resist wrong is common among religions; religious beliefs cannot be entirely disassociated from social and political life, particularly during times of conflict over values and mores. Justice, truth, loyalty and peace are contested values because we have different religious and ideological beliefs about the right way to interpret, achieve or apply these ideals. The very old social question returns: how does a society enact the highest good (not just prevent crime) without coercion or violence? Can persuasion replace coercion as the method for sustaining the continual contestation over interpreting and following religious or foundational truth?

Engaging (Not Avoiding) Irresolvable Conflicts

Political, commercial and legal forms of non-violent conflict resolution have historically assumed that opponents' similar desires to avoid painful conflict will bring them to reasonable compromises. However, this assumption of "win-win" diplomatic compromise cannot readily be applied to conflicts over unchanging religious order or truth. With integrity of their convictions people usually elevate *eternal* truth and salvation or enlightenment above social tranquility or healthy prosperity in this short, mortal life. To the believer, peace of mind is more important than peaceful relations with often well-meaning people who promote falsehood that leads to eternal misery.

It is often thought that anyone who advocates a religious position as superior to another must be an arrogant fanatic or naïvely undereducated. But looking deeper we should ask, can a humble and wise person live with integrity *without* advocating the

higher truth he or she sincerely believes would benefit the world? Our common humanity is found in our similar capacity to care about each other's welfare and to try to discern what is best to do given diverse contested beliefs and practices. We act on our beliefs and try to persuade others of our views. Neither a liberal education nor an affirmation of common respect for humanity will resolve conflicts over our fundamental beliefs. Education sharpens and clarifies the extraordinary incompatibility between some of our world-views and values. When facing these incompatible truth claims about ultimate purpose and reality over which there has never been universal agreement, people cannot *live* as if in a state of suspended judgment. Humans live in a forced-choice test—though agnostic in mind, in body we either join or not, act in favor, or by doing nothing, against the momentous conflicting propositions about truth that learning presents to us.

Liberal education is vital to our social well-being because it makes our differences and similarities clear, but if our learning stops with the content of our different beliefs and not the right way to engage disagreements over them we have little hope to improve our current intercultural conflicts. It is essential to teach that wise, good-hearted people can come to different conclusions about reality and truth in science, in arts, in politics, business, philosophy and, of course, religion. And above all, a liberal education needs to impart how to respectfully engage in the continual contest over truth. The way this is communicated is more important than content of the message. If any teacher is contemptuous of another belief, this is the deep message to the students, no matter how civil or polite the delivery. Thus, the self knowledge and integrity of teachers of religions and philosophies other than their own is vital to diminishing the rampant resentment between groups that look down on each other. Transparency of disclosed bias is the only 'objectivity', and the only way for liberal education to be trustworthy.

Those with cultural or religious fundamental disagreements would be prudent (without compromising integrity) to grant each other the benefit of the doubt with respect to motives and intelligence. They should begin by assuming the other to be a trustworthy opponent desiring to help—not a vicious enemy bent on destruction. The way of mutual engagement over religious truth would entail persuasive, transparent diplomacy with the frank purpose of influencing conversion of, not compromise with, the other. This would be inter-religious diplomacy that delved below (without neglecting) interests in economic or political power to the question of divine truth and purpose and authority. The mutual aim to influence a conversion of belief and practice would be explicit, and the participation in the dialogue would be voluntary. This is diplomatic dialogue, not debate. It is the sincere sharing of witness and experience and reasoned belief. It is a diplomacy based on the recognition that religious opponents often *do not desire to end tensions* over differences, but to engage in a respectful persuasion contest over the truth. While seeking to find useful ways to cooperate on humanitarian projects, the goal for inter-religious diplomacy is not traditional conflict resolution; rather the aim is sustaining an irresolvable contest in *peaceful tension*.

Peaceful Tension as the Goal

Throughout history, conflicts over the purposes of life and the right way to live tend to produce social strife. Intelligent believers usually judge their religious or ideological worldview to be superior to the alternatives; otherwise they would not hold it. For most people, this judgment is not an act of arrogance but a sincere expression of conscience. Nevertheless, inherent in judging one way to be superior to another is the unavoidable offense, implied if unspoken, of calling into question the judgment or character of those who give allegiance to alternative ways. In our increasingly diverse societies, conflicts over religion 'disturb the peace' and threaten the well being of families, communities and/or societies. These conflicts wherever they occur have the potential for serious escalation. There are no purely local religious conflicts, as believers around the world act in solidarity with their religious tribe-mates. This will make tensions of allegiance between religion and tribe and ones home nation a more difficult matter to negotiate.

New methods are needed to provide ways to increase trust and good will among sincere believers who, because they feel responsible to advocate their religion's superiority, cannot avoid the offensiveness of criticizing others. Adamant advocates need safe places where they can contest in good faith their deepest differences. In a new

form of inter-religious space, religiously bilingual diplomats might forthrightly speak their belief of superior truth while agreeing in advance to take no offence at another's exclusive claim of religious superiority. Each party is an opposing witness who, in good faith, feels responsible to influence the other to adopt a new religious belief and allegiance. They know that to respect one another, they must fully speak their views of the truth—especially their reasons for believing in the superiority of their religion.

Decent people in families, communities, or societies can seriously disagree about the purpose of life and the best way to live. Conflicts over religious differences can become fundamentally intractable. Although understanding that leads to compromise resolves many social conflicts, religious conflicts are sharpened when parties come to understand clearly that they cannot with integrity compromise their beliefs or practices. Unlike legal or commercial conflicts, inter-religious conflicts resist settlement because the opponents recognize no common authority to adjudicate their differences, and the stakes are much greater than in mundane affairs. Often, parties feel that cosmic order, eternal life or enlightenment is on the line, and that their loved ones are in danger of great misery or losing great joy or peace if they go the wrong way.

It is normal with such momentous matters at stake that we desire and find some certainty among people who agree with our beliefs. However, when we are convinced we have received the highest divine truth often we have a subtle—if not strong—suspicion and disrespect for anyone who disagrees with our beliefs and practices. This is usually not because of our arrogance, but because we assume God is fair to all. Those who have been blessed with knowing the highest divine truth presume that a just God would not purposefully leave others in dark confusion; therefore, any who sincerely desire to know and follow God's truth will be clearly given it—by their conscience. It follows that those who do not agree with them about the highest truth when it is presented, although claiming to be sincere, must either be too stupid, naïve, prideful, lazy or evil to acknowledge and follow the clear call from their conscience. No matter how civilly we behave, this attitude is not conducive to building respect and trust. It more typically engenders unspoken resentment that eventually explodes in social conflict. Yet, how can this offensiveness be avoided if with integrity we truly believe our neighbors are in spiritual danger? While the offensiveness of contradictory convictions cannot be honestly avoided, we need not choose to 'take offense.'

Inter-religious Diplomacy—Respectful Contestation

A new acceptance of the social healthiness of forthright, respectful contestation over ultimate truth is required. However, respect between opponents who disagree about God or reality can only exist by granting each other in advance respectfulness. We can indeed eventually prove to be simple, naïve, prideful, or evil, but unless we begin our disagreements by presuming our opponents are wise, knowledgeable, open, and good-hearted, it is unlikely that either party will listen deeply to the other. In actuality, disrespect is the emotional result from disinterest or disregard for a relationship of mutual influence. In matters of the heart we are only open to influence from those we think we can influence. Dialogue, no matter how proper, between people who disrespect each other is mouthing empty sounds. So how do we who disagree deeply come to desire a relationship of mutual influence? How do we sincerely respect, let alone trust, an opponent?

For those who believe in a singular divine or rational order, there is a crucial theological or practical move that allows for the possibility that divine wisdom or natural order has created the condition for irresolvable differences over truth to test our love or care for each other to the limit. Using a Hebrew Biblical story here is useful. The confusion of tongues at Babel was God's way of blessing humanity and showing it that cultural and technical cooperation was not an effective way to build a tower to heaven. The human heart had to change—to love for the good of the other as well as the self—and that could only be realized in the crucible of irreconcilable differences. So as we intermix more and more with those who do not believe as we do, we are wise to replace any ideal goal of social tranquility with a the practical aim of peaceful tension. I think Henry David Thoreau had something like this in mind when he penned "*Let Such Pure Hate Still Underprop Our Love:*"

Let such pure hate still underprop
Our love, that we may be

Each other's conscience,
And have our sympathy
Mainly from thence.

We'll one another treat like gods
And all faith we have
In virtue and in truth, bestow
On either, and suspicion leave
To gods below.

We have seen in history that attempts to end conflicts “once and for all” inevitably lead to the continuation of conflict. Likewise, in continually trying to evade conflicts over deep differences we only increase frustration and hidden resentment that eventually explodes in ill will. It is time to try a better way to face our irresolvable differences over ideology and religion. Through forthright dialogue that discloses both appreciation and criticism, we can fulfill our obligations to express as witnesses the truth we hold dear, and to listen as our opponents do the same. We must choose not to rip our garments in disgust at their claims, because we enter the contestation granting respect for the intelligence, integrity, and goodwill for our opponent. If in this experience we come to trust the motive (not the doctrine) of our opponents, we have a basis upon which to build trustworthy diplomatic relations. Even religious zealots can sustain a peaceful tension of co-resistance with opponents, who like them desire to influence the hearts and minds of others for good. With this shift in attitude and method, the next generation of militant idealists will consecrate their lives to persuasive missionary work instead of coercive violence.

Marriage as Analogy for Social Relations

Healthy social relations, like good marriages, are based on trust that difficult conflicts can be sustained without dissolution of the social bond. Researchers at the Gottman Institute have systematically observed successful marriages for many years. They report that 69% of the conflicts in long lasting marriages are respectfully sustained, and never resolved. The happier couples face their irresolvable differences in forthright, periodic dialogue without anger (Gottman et. al. 2005, 299-300). After years of observing inter-religious discussions and dialogues I believe that the key to improving trust between religions is not in ignoring or attaining doctrinal agreements, nor in doing humanitarian service together, although both of these might be helpful in some situations. Inter-religious trust comes more from people facing their intractable conflicts with honesty, patience, and respect for (*not* sympathy with) the distinctive differences that bring them into conflict. While contentious disputations destroy trust and foster envy and violence, forthright contestation between opponents who care for each other builds trust and good will. Holding adamantly to their own views, honest contestants who listen carefully to their opponents often come to see themselves in the integrity of the other. Dialogue can lead parties to understand not just why they should be opponents, but why they should be trustworthy ones—that would not misrepresent the truth or desire to the other. Inter-religious diplomacy is born when people learn enough about each other to make similarities and differences clear, and to sense the ethical necessity, if not divine mandate to be an honest witness to the goodness, not just the wrongness, of the opposition. This openness to truth from any source is not based on relativism or an over-arching belief in the ultimate harmony of all religions. It is based on the desire to influence others by being open to their influence. It is based on the “trust-but-verify” strategy that requires ongoing evidence that our opponents care enough to listen closely to us, and though persuading our change of heart is their goal, they make no attempt to coerce our will.

A New System for Inter-religious Diplomacy

The perennial challenge of sustaining social cohesion in the face of perennial religious conflicts over the foundational authority for human order is growing more difficult as our society becomes intermixed with larger numbers of people with different world views. To try to end conflicts completely by forcing tranquil unity is always tempting to the majority population. However, history has proven that ending conflict is tantamount to ending differences, and that leads eventually to massive violence in the

name of peaceful ideological unity. We may subdue our opponents for a season, but the resentment will rise and harmful retaliation is sure. So, we best learn to live in uncomfortable peace, rather like listening to our good music with a slight ear ache. Patience is the attitude and diplomacy the skill for pluralistic peace. In addition to the right attitude and skill, an institutional system is required if diplomacy between religions is to become the norm.

A new place, an inter-religious space, is needed for the intentional *religious practice* of diplomatic engagement in cooperative and contestational dialogue. This will be a place both virtual and actual that is inviting and safe for diplomats of all religious stripes—especially those who in times past saw little reason to proclaim their truth—to meet with others of strongly opposing beliefs. It will be for the most articulate representatives of each religious tradition (and subdivisions thereof) for private as well as public diplomatic engagements that benefit their communities by proclaiming their distinct sacred stories from a highly credible inter-religious platform, and learning from others better ways to improve the world.

In future years when people gain the confidence that they can enter inter-religious space without risk of ridicule or misrepresentation they will find the pain of facing conflict is less bothersome and to the excitement of the contest is more enticing. Not that contests over religious truth are pleasant sporting events. Given the eternal stakes contestants over truth can feel as if they are risking their spiritual lives--more like gladiators than ball players. Inter-religious contestation, the mutual witnessing to conflicting claims, is a way for shallow civility to marry deep integrity. We can learn to acknowledge explicitly, with respectful transparency, the inevitable tension we feel as our desire to trust the good will of another is constrained by our mistrust in the other's dangerously wrong religious beliefs. We must learn the difficult pleasure of learning from people that we believe to be mistaken so they will be open to learn from us.

We need a new venue for this mutual exchange of ideological or religious language and practice. It should not occur in our courts or legislatures, nor in our sacred precincts, each dedicated to a particular worship and allegiance. It should not occur in our secular academic or commercial venues or the open town square where religious proclamations are given no more dignity than any other statements. Religious groups need to establishment of an inter-religious space where believing diplomats who learn each other's religious languages communicate clearly and respectfully as unofficial proxies for their entire tradition. The trust and patience that can build from this network for inter-religious diplomacy will pervade the other sectors of society where our business is heavily influenced by values and beliefs that cannot there be well expressed.

A practical system of inter-religious diplomacy should promote ethical methods of for cooperation and contestation without favoring particular religions or ideologies, worldwide religious unions, multi-religious councils, parliaments, or ecumenical movements. The network of inter-religious diplomats would be organized in diplomatic missions with the legitimacy of their respective communities fully behind them. No system will never be able to perfectly balance the power differences that talent and means and spiritual strength make in the world. But when building trust is a major goal, any unmatched diplomats will wisely acknowledge this reality and by so doing increase their mutual credibility and ethical stature. To build trust where it does not now reside, inter-religious diplomacy must especially appeal to the very traditional and very secular communities that do not normally participate in dialogue. Doing this will encourage full expression of belief, including the sincere belief that one has been given the superior religious way that all others would be wise to follow.

A system of inter-religious diplomacy rests on a few cross-cultural principles that are voluntarily advocated by those who participate: First, human relations flourish when they are built on respectful mutual persuasion of conscience, not on forces of coercion or threats of violence. Second, an opponent can be wrong about religion without being stupid, naive, weak, lazy or evil – and can be a trustworthy person who is not an enemy desiring to coerce or harm another. Third, while passive tolerance of others' religious beliefs is a baseline requirement for social order in pluralistic societies, honest sharing of beliefs, including appreciation and criticism of others, demonstrates a higher form of social responsibility, civility, and ethical stature if done with the motive of helping others.

Conclusion

The impetus for social religious conflict all over the globe in the 21st century, not unlike that which drove European and American religious conflict in the 17th century, will derive from the need to contest fundamental disagreements over the basis for ordering new societal organizations. As de Tocqueville said, religious and ideological beliefs and cultural habits form the under-girding mores upon which law and social order rests. The American experiment of allowing a continuous contestation over the foundation of social order between its citizens of various religions is about to become a contender with secular and religious alternatives in establishing a global experiment. De Tocqueville would not be too sanguine about unifying the world legal and political order around contested foundationalism and religious freedom because the various cultures on the planet do not share the common religious mores of the American nation in the 1830's.

Nevertheless, to catch up with the economic order, a new global experiment, presumably including religiously bi-lingual diplomats, will be promoted when pressure for order from intermixing cultures become intense. Without unifying mores, some overtly planned system for the contestation of religious differences will be needed to channel the impetus for coercive conflict into the discipline of persuasive contestation. If we learn how to do inter-religious diplomacy, then violent conflicts will be less frequent and respectful contests will be the norm. An experiment creating a new inter-religious space for these "conversion contests" where religious languages, learned by the participants, can be used to discuss spiritual values and authorities without apology. Neither secular nor religious judges will be there to adjudicate the contestation of religious experiences and doctrinal evidences provided by the participants. The voluntary agreement to speak and listen will govern interactions in inter-religious space. The most respected and influential diplomats will be religiously bi-lingual and be known for their integrity and credibility. Ethical conventions of inter-religious diplomacy allow no lying, no threats of intimidation, and no disrespectful tone or abuse of symbols or beliefs. Anyone who breaches these conventions would soon find him/herself alone.

Will contests of persuasion actually replace coercive conflicts as the preferred means of influencing the generations to come? It is always tempting to impose military and economic power on those weaker than we are for material gain, but as we intermix our societies of different believers it will become obvious that using force to impose belief on others is a sign of weakness for the imposer. It is—in any culture—a commonly accepted fact that the human heart cannot be forced to yield its highest allegiance. Can fervent believers of all stripes—including the millions of secularists—see that to win in the long will require patient exchanges of criticism and appreciation that will move hearts without contention? Will the contest for truth this time be engaged in peaceful tension? Viktor Frankl taught that peace is not a tension-free state of being; it derives from continually striving toward a goal worthy of the human spirit. Can the practice of forthrightly persuading others to change their ultimate beliefs be rehabilitated as an authentic expression of worthy human striving or will it be considered cultural genocide? The answer depends on how those who desire to change the world decide to organize their influence in relation to those who disagree with them. The pragmatists would be optimistic that those who exacerbate harmful ideological or religious conflicts to increase their political power will be less successful than those religious leaders who inspire their communities to show as brightly as they can their distinctive ways to improve the lives of others. The Qu'ran says that God could have made all nations one people, but made the world with many religions so they would push each other to perform greater righteousness. (Sura 5:48) As it is written, so let it be done.

Works Cited

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Charles Randall Paul, Ph.D. is the founder and president of the Foundation for Inter-religious Diplomacy (NY and UT). Among other projects the foundation is building a network of religiously bi-lingual inter-religious diplomats to build trust (without ecumenical agreement) between diverse religious communities. He has a BS from Brigham Young University in social psychology and an MBA from Harvard University. He worked as a partner at Trammell Crow Company in the southwestern USA where he developed many commercial real estate projects for 16 years. He then obtained a doctorate in 2000 at the Committee on Social Thought at the University of Chicago, writing his dissertation on methods for engaging in religious contestation without recourse to coercion or violence. His major academic mentors were David Tracy, Martin Marty and Harold Bloom. He is on the executive board of the Society for Mormon Philosophy and Theology, and is an editor of the *International Journal for Decision Ethics*. He and his wife, Jann, have five children and ten grandchildren.